


ITALO TAVOLATO

G R O S Z

WITH 33 REPRODUCTIONS IN PHOTOTYPE



"VALORI PLASTICI," PUBLISHERS - ROME



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1924

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A judgment of God has been let loose on the relics of the Germany of William: the art of George Grosz, which is a regular scourge for the bourgeoisie. Never before have such vindictive ferocity and such an outpouring of ardour been seen in a Northern country. In the figurative expression of a furious hate, Grosz is not content with striking the enemy in the face, in such a way as to damage very severely his human lineaments but he attacks him even in his biological functions, in his sex, and in his destiny. His graphic definitions amount really to capital executions. By the virtue of the satiric form inherent in him, he succeeds in destroying the Philistine negation, and so takes his share in bringing down the reign of the under-man.

The more he thinks of the bourgeois, the more abstract does the latter become, so much so indeed that he appears to us finally as a kind of larva of humanity. Grosz does not seek to make

his point with the empiric fact, as do the humourists, but he represents an interior reality which is intuitive, visionary and truer than the exterior material reality. His method of expression is that of classic art. With formal elements, not to be found in the model, that is not manifested in nature, elements delineated with creative and not copied touches, he brings into being a new, genuine and original reality and he gives to his types a verisimilitude and superior vitality to that of any empiric vitality.

Grosz's work reveals the vision of the physiological inferno to which lower humanity is condemned. Metropolitan surroundings imply a functional and mechanical interpretation of space. The streets of the great city are like the desolate trenches of industrialism ; overflowing with wretched inhibited bourgeois flesh. Professors and profiteers, Alpinists and officers, baggages and apaches, students and souteneurs, jailbirds and employees, boarding-house guests and house-wives, thieves and sufferers from syphilis, Junkers and wounded soldiers, men of business and cut-throats : all these types seem to be intent on carrying out a lofty social mission in merely walking about the town with a certain absurd motion which seems an end in itself. In the midst of this human uproar and confusion, decorative trams and consumptive plants mix themselves together with menacing night signs

and animals reduced to a bourgeois flatness, while sky - scrapers cut through a ragged network of electric wires. Luxury grins evrywhere in its brothel-like manifestations, and the stigmata of crime are revealed even on the funeral hearses. The bourgeois, in chasing the business affair which for him is a voluptuousness or in chasing voluptuousness which is a matter of business has nevertheless occasionally a troubled moment when, for instance, he perceives that he is but a machine among machines, while the formless materializations of a syphilitic blood continue to circulate in arithmetic spasms through the greyish arteries of the city. The criterion of simultaneity perfectly adapted to the complex and multiple discord of the subject is followed in the street scenes as well as in the interiors, where the chaos of modern civilization reigns. It is seen that the negation of the pause, of polarity and distance does not create literary effects, and therefore the integral fusion of plastic planes seems spontaneous, planes that are physical and psychical at the same time, the whole productive of an amazingly impudent effect — a cinematographic plane of evocation. Café tables, states of mind, angles, heads, utensils, memories and drunks are mixed up with one another. A game of cards is interlocked with a coitus, a soldier standing at attention has a chamber-pot for a head; the Emperor William appears in a photograph, some

game in his hand, and his mantle covered with decorations right down to the pubic region. In the foreground of the same picture a gross prostitute smiles with wide nostrils and shows her chest to the public gaze. The trousers of the passers-by swell at the fork. All the skirts are diaphanous, and there is a general atmosphere of violent sexual desire. The centres of the composition are displaced. Sometimes the formal fulcrum of a figure is localized with such emphasis in a pair of cuff-links or in the neat square of a plaster stuck on a pimply neck that a grotesque and virulent satire without comparison results. At other times, the image, haughty and conscious of itself though it be, as if it had to support a world of ideas and responsibilities, is essentially determined by a subsidiary factor, by some exterior coefficient, as for example by the cigar stuck in the twisted mouth, a mouth specially constructed to balance that cigar in which the entire Philistine character is concentrated, and wherein the smoker and his destiny disappear and are destroyed.

One might say that the interiors of Grosz are mounted under a caisson. In the false intimacy of the four walls the rarefied air sucks in again the breath, and nameless terrors reveal themselves here and there from a pair of puffy eyes or a swollen hand. But the pragmatic of quiet living succeeds in making excited nerves viscid again,

and the corrective for every methaphysic suspicion is the bourgeois laugh, hard and sonorous as a neigh. Curly-haired puppets sway with enormous buttocks, while representatives of the epoch lift their glass with mechanical rigidity in honour of a time which is money. Horrible officers with thick necks and tuber-like heads grind their square jaws. Squalid waiters, their eyes like points, balance themselves on their corns. A gramophone roars out the national anthem.

Wherever George Grosz lays a hand, a vein of infernal material is revealed. He is no humourist anxious to ridicule the defects and weaknesses of others, nor even — notwithstanding his extremist political attitude — an anti-corruptionist intent on reforming society, by denouncing its deficiencies and vices. His satire derives from a profound, terrible and serious religious consciousness of human nature, from a conception which despises half measures, compromises, aesthetisms, in order to roam in virgin territory and in unexplored fields, in the realm of souls uncontaminated by bourgeois infection. His clairvoyant hatred, pitiless adversary of Philistinism, hides and protects a silent love for that defenceless *élite* of humanity harried and poisoned by the vulgar. At the same time, Grosz does not fight his holy war as a regular soldier, but rather as an adventurer and franc-tireur. He is truly the *enfant perdu* of a great cause. He

throws himself wildly into the fray and strikes out, and when he strikes, one of his blows is worth a hundred others. Some of his friezes and graphic touches, which are so valiant and vibrating give the effect of a rain of stones and blows. An ingenuous aggressiveness is his constant norm, and with a popular exuberance he marks the beats of his polemical rhythm that wells up from him spontaneously and freshly.

As the precocious urchin delights in giving vent to his sub-consciousness by making obscene drawings or writing political legends on the walls of public lavatories, as the apache likes to illustrate in epic phrases on the prison walls his deeds, so George Grosz, urchin painter and apache, produces his designs, at once infantile and pornographic, while all the time go up shrieks of joy and hilarity from the pictorial *bon ton*.

Urchins and apaches, *voyous* and *sans-culottes*, primitive and savage are in no sense unconsecrated beings like the bourgeois. Their outbursts of ire and voluptuousness do not offend God. Similarly, the insults and imprecations of Grosz breaking forth in a Dionysiac plenitude from generous blood have a singularly persuasive virtue. Since Grosz's art derives from a mystic depth in his soul, without passing through cerebral retorts or philters of resentment, we are sensible even in his ugliest figures of an emotional reverberation, of the

suave volupty which accompanies the act of artistic creation.

For this artist, the destruction of the bourgeois is more a religious rite than a process of social criticism. For him it is the sacrifice of the scapegoat to the offended divinity made to placate His rage and and bring back to earth its pristine greatness and its primeval beauty.

As the establisher of a certain social code, and as wielder of the political power, as a social class in fact, the bourgeois may prove lovable or hateful in equal measure with the proletariat, and from this point of view he is ought evoke indifference in an art which has nothing to do with journalism. But Grosz hates the bourgeois in himself and as himself; he hates the bourgeois species, the bourgeois as race, as a biological specimen, and this hatred which has arisen without sensible motives and in defiance of causality from a profound stratum of human nature is outlined against a mythical and religious background.

Compared to the social and economic justification of other anti-bourgeois tendencies, which are vulgar and inadequate to the ends sought to be compassed, the destruction of the Philistine wrought by Grosz takes on metaphysical meanings. The bourgeois, in the Grosz plan is equivalent to the sinner in the Christian myth: both in fact being symbols of organic incompleteness, irresponsible

personifications of the defects of the created, produced by an experiment of nature that has been a failure. The bourgeois species would seem then to represent a heteronomous and relative principle, just as in the antique *polis* the slaves represented dead quantitative rubbish, human material in the larva state. And if, as all religions tend to show, the first and only duty of man is perfection, which is to say an effective agreeableness (*genialità*), then the bourgeois is he who has lacked the courage to conquer a superior humanity, by making a breach in the divine substance. He is the man, on the contrary who has been content to become fossilized half way along the road.

Having lost the notion of divinity and the remembrance of the road that leads to it, having forgotten the vision of the sublime ascensional possibilities reserved to man and to man only, the bourgeois type, in order to escape being pulverized by terror and swallowed by his own interior emptiness, gives himself importance and installs himself in a leaden stasis, imagining himself to be a model and measure of the « created », which is the arrival point and definite phase of human progress. The ancient idea of *humanitas* has vanished for ever for the bourgeois race, and consequently every attribute of the superior man: art religion, love and wisdom. Wherever the bourgeois dictates

the laws, there life is diminished, and belittled, degenerating towards chaos.

Grosz delineates the physical and metaphysical complex which clearly separates humanity from the bourgeois. The types of his satire, though it is true they resemble man, are different from man in everything, in conscience and in bowels, in nature and in act. Deprived of their proper identity, these featherless bipeds, in order to give themselves a character, are obliged to borrow the manners of others, acting parts which do not suit them.

They generally play the part of the important man of affairs, the man who can make himself feared, and mimic with insolent importance the genuine thing. Then the bourgeois body, synthesis of all the negations and dissonances of nature seems to reduce itself to the black appendix of the policeman's belly. The shoulders become too square in the officers, and too sloping in the employees. The women have too short legs and take too long a step when walking; protestant pastors lose their thoraxes. In other cases, the bourgeois mannikins imitate high society. The studied gesture is converted into a mechanical movement. Eyes emptied of sunshine pierce elephantine female rotondities vilely arranged around a beflagged table. Pachiderms, stuck in their fauteils, curl up their noses tickled by gaseous drinks. Mouths without song bark hymns to the return of the Hohenzol-

lern, while outside in the street in the spectral atmosphere, a wounded soldier, blind and mad and reduced to the level of a mechanical contrivance, holds out his artificial hand to the passers-by. The visionary intensity of similar evocations makes one turn pale.

Even the studies and sketches of Grosz are physiognomic events. It seems incredible that a collection of impudent faces can form a set and a social class. Made retrograde to excess in the course of generations and degenerations, these bourgeois heads, shapeless as troglodyte remains, present an amazing multiplicity of absence of character. Not one resembles the other, though all have come from the same bourgeois mould. But Grosz knows how to decipher the mystery of the proteiform chimera. With absolute mathematical certainty of line, he traces the physiognomic initials expressing the formula that constitutes the bastard race. With art's magic, he drives out his victims from their recesses and forces them to show themselves as they are, and as they would like to be. Possessing no interior values, they exhaust themselves in the definition and return powerless into the limbo of the uncreated.

Grosz's satire is a burning glass which reflects the bourgeois soul, consuming it in flame.

REPRODUCTIONS



FROM A SOCIALIST'S LIFE



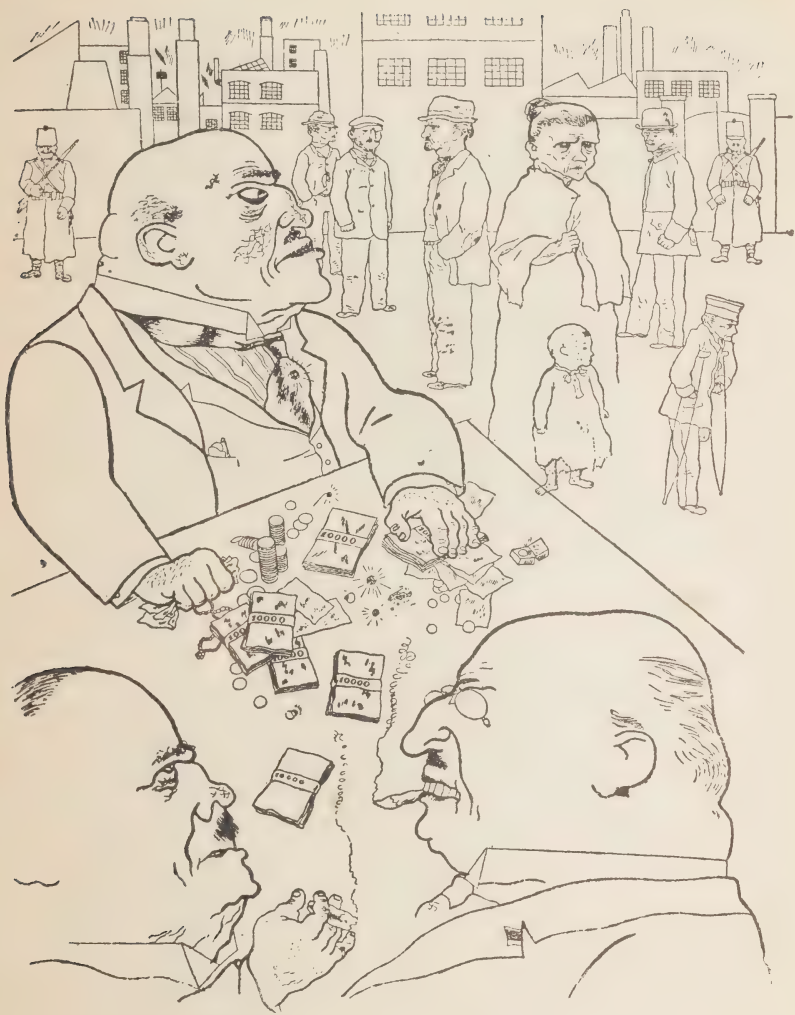
THERE'S SOMETHING IN IT



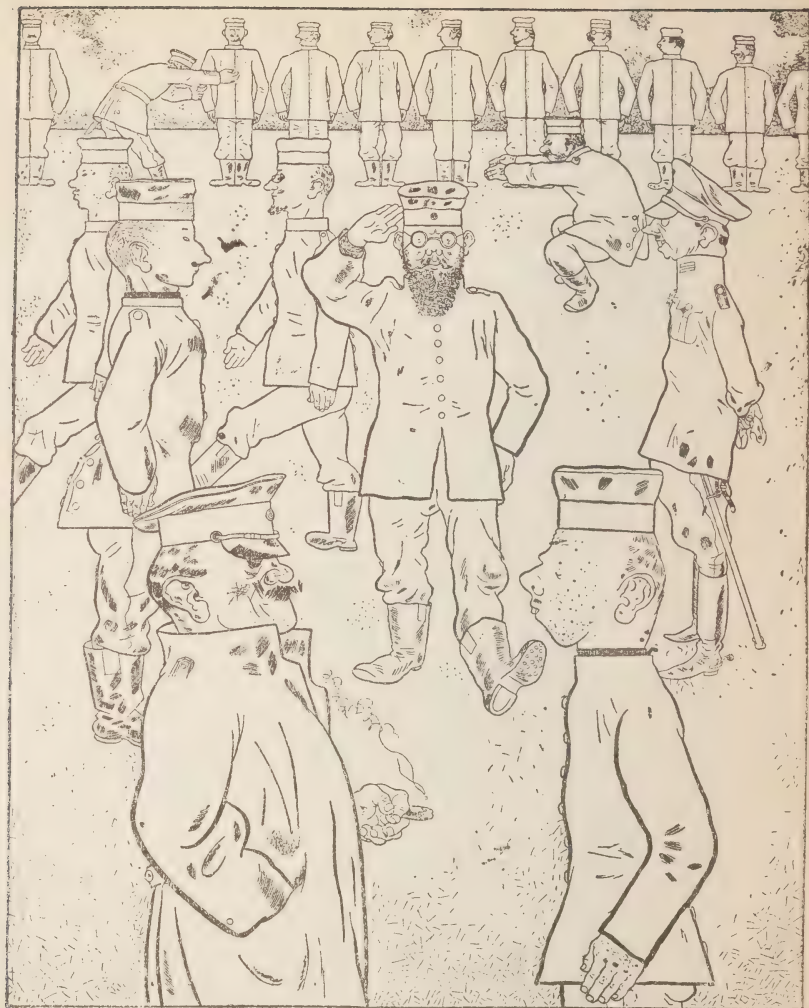
SPRING'S AWAKENING



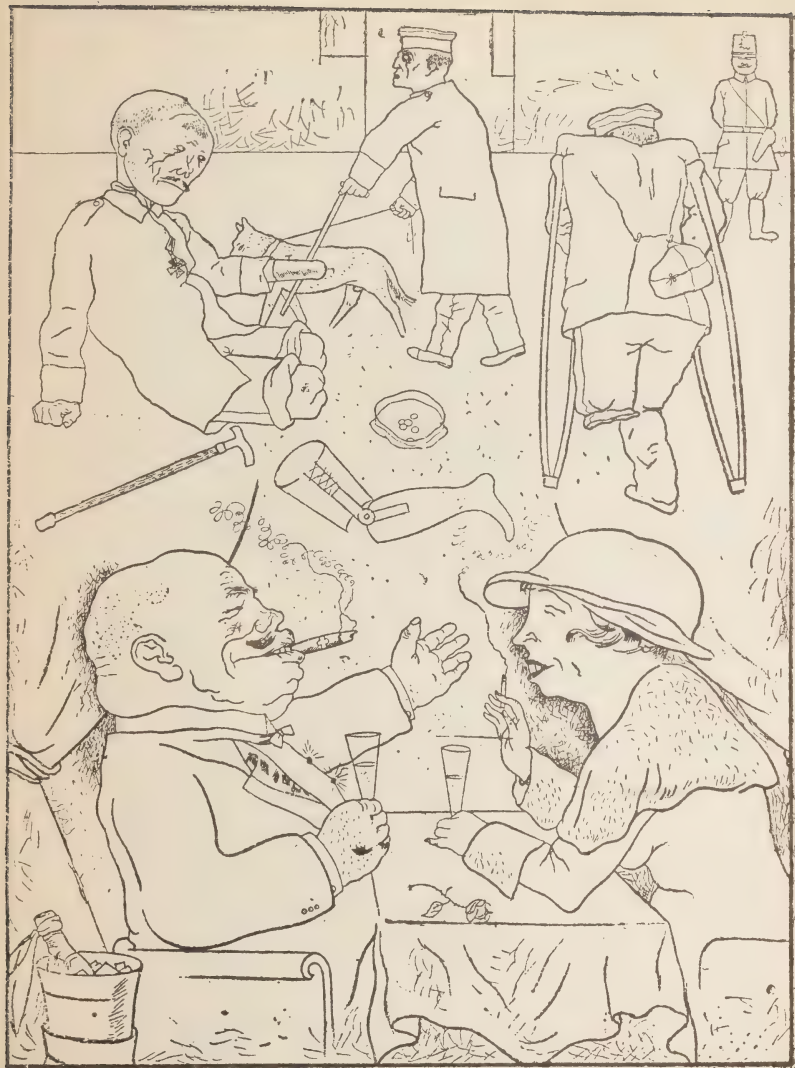
THE COMMON FRONT



THE MIGHTY TOADS



IF THE SOLDIERS WERE NOT SUCH FOOLS, THEY WOULD HAVE FLED
ALREADY (*King Frederick*)



THE BOOTY OF WAR FOR THE RICH; ITS MISERY FOR THE POOR



GREETINGS FROM SAXONY



THE FAMILY CONSTITUTES THE BASIS OF THE STATE



WALK



SEPARATED



OH, ANCIENT STUDENT GLORY!



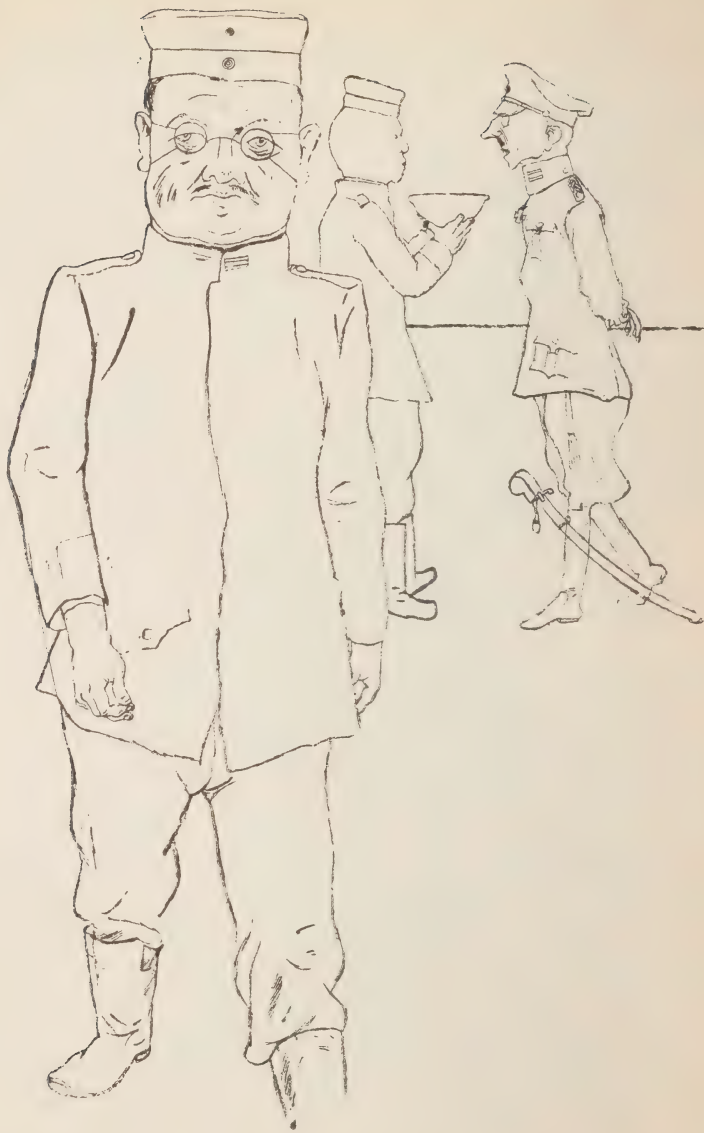
LET HIM ENJOY WHO CAN, EVEN IF THE WEAK PERISH



UNDRESSING



WHERE THEY ARE GOING



READY FOR GARRISON DUTY



IN KAPP'S SERAGLIO



SUNDAY MORNING



PASTORAL



THE GERMAN BOURGEOIS IS A BOWEL FULL OF FEAR AND HOPE
AT THE MERCY OF GOD (*Herwegl*)



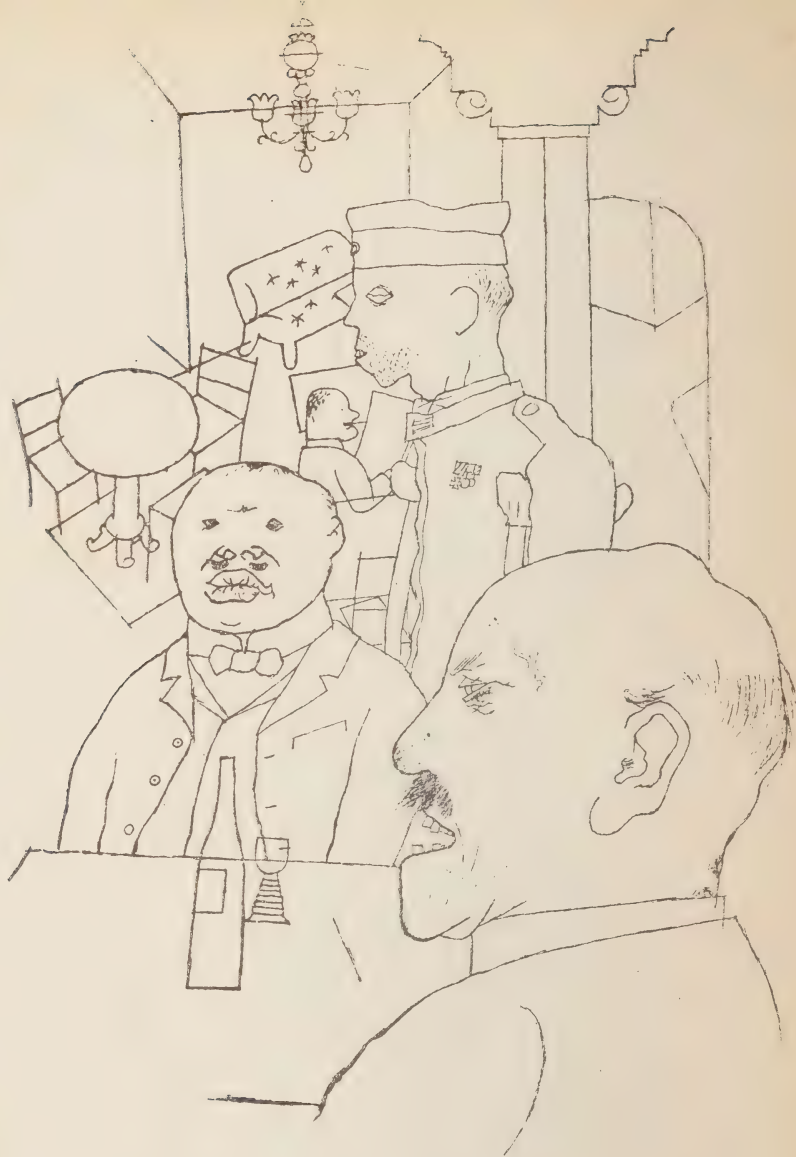
HALF HOLIDAY



IN INTIMACY



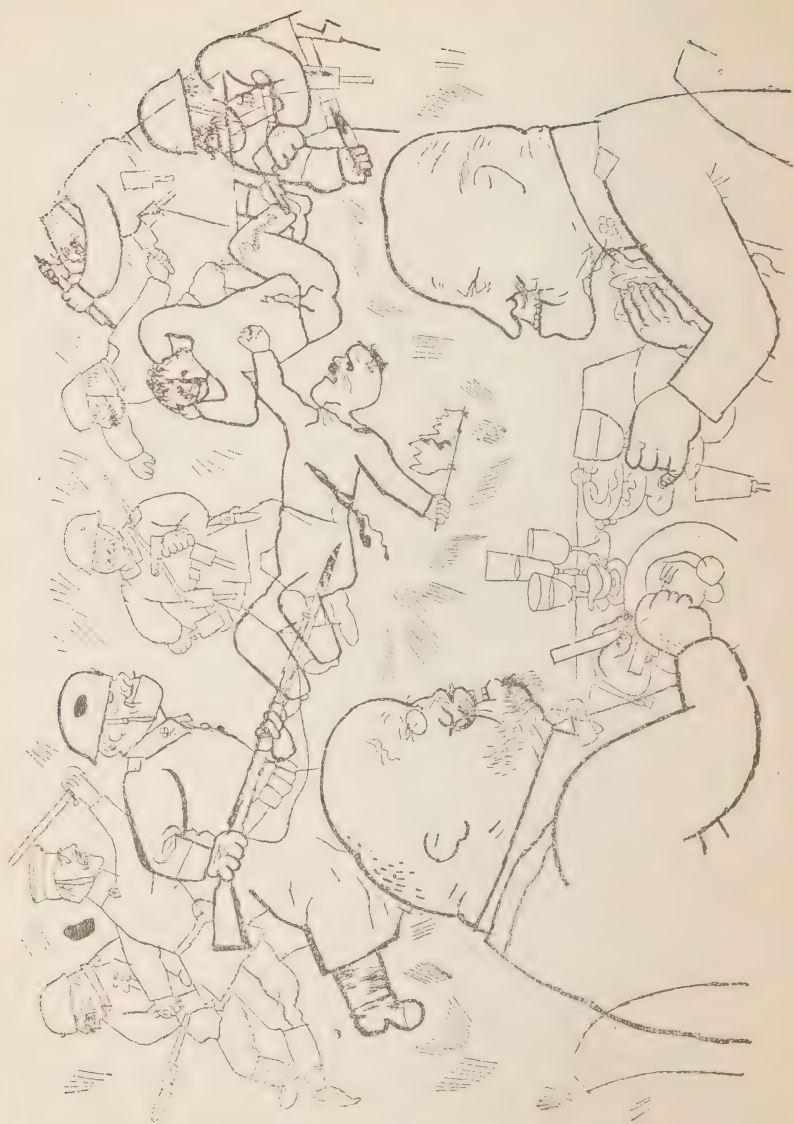
SCENE



HARD TIMES



WHEN WE PRAY, WE PROSTRATE OURSELVES BEFORE THE JUST GOD



THE COMMUNISTS ARISE WHEN THE UNIFORMS DISAPPEAR





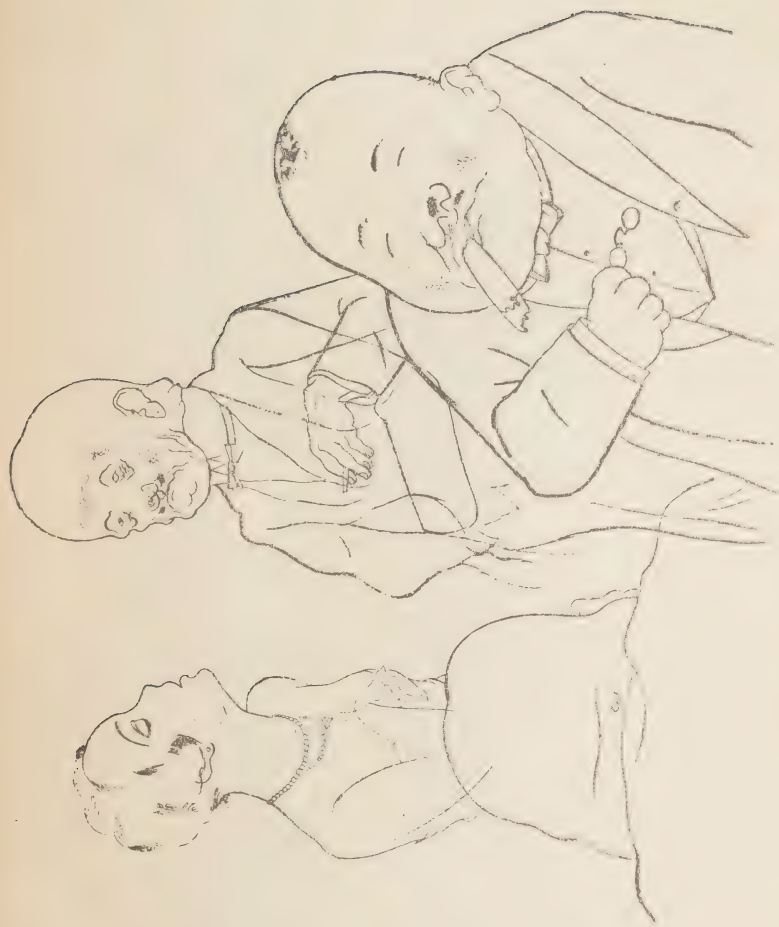
THERE'S A SMELL OF THE PLEBS



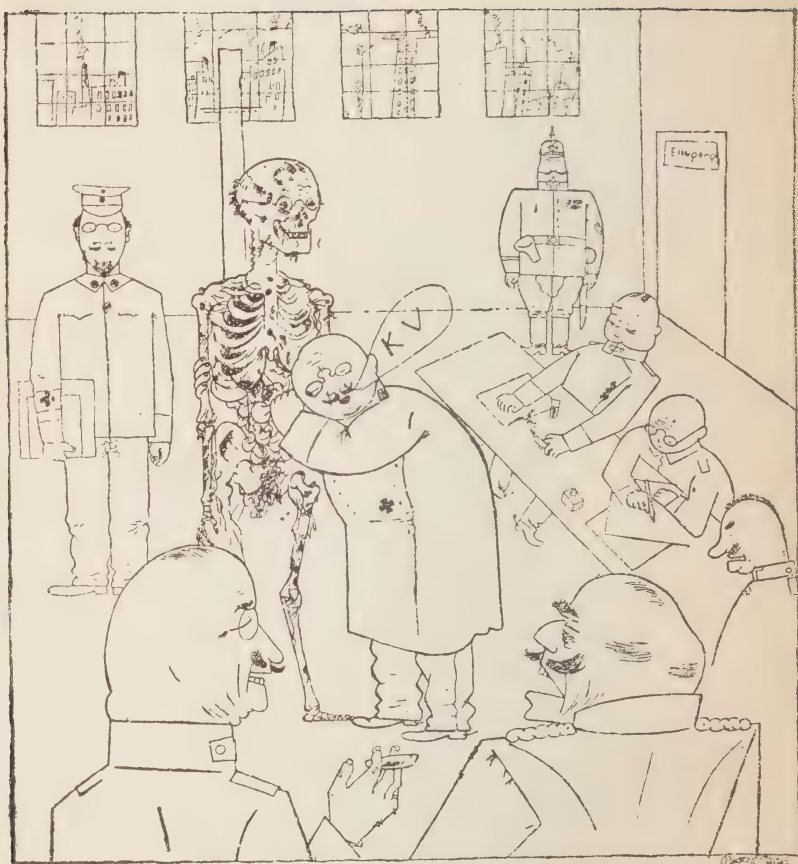
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